China Should Match California's Effort to Slow Climate Change

The New York Times

September 14, 2018 Friday 11:45 EST

Copyright 2018 The New York Times Company All Rights Reserved

Section: OPINION

Length: 1023 words

Byline: Justin Gillis and Hal Harvey

Highlight: By pledging to cut its emissions in half by midcentury, China would propel itself into a world-leading role in the fight against global warming.

Body

SAN FRANCISCO — At long last, a handful of political leaders are starting to set goals on greenhouse emissions that are consistent with the magnitude of the climate crisis.

One of the boldest strokes yet came early this week from Gov. Jerry Brown of California. He signed a bill establishing a legal target of zero emissions for the state's electricity system by 2045. Additionally, in a leap of imagination that nobody saw coming, he signed another document: an executive order setting a goal of zero emissions by 2045 for the entire California economy, not just electricity. That includes cars, trucks, agriculture and every other activity that puts emissions into the air.

It is not clear how this goal can be met, and we will come back to that in a moment. But first, we offer a challenge: China should match California's initiative with a bold new target of its own.

A zero-emissions goal by midcentury may be unrealistic for a fast-growing developing country, but China could shoot for a 50 to 60 percent reduction in emissions by then, to be followed by a goal of zero later in the century.

A commitment like that would take China far beyond any previous pledge it has made on global warming, propelling it into a world-leading role in fighting climate change. It would be good not just for China. The country has become such an important technology supplier that its commitment would bring along many other countries.

This week, Governor Brown has been hosting a big climate-action meeting in San Francisco, with thousands attending. China sent the largest delegation of any country, highlighting its efforts to modernize its power grid, push electric cars and buses, and clean up the air pollution that chokes its cities.

Both California and China have made historic progress. California already gets more than half its power from low-emission sources. The state long ago adopted one of the world's best building codes, so that every new house and office is highly efficient. Sales of electric cars are growing rapidly. California emissions have fallen below 1990 levels years earlier than expected, and the state is in the vanguard as emissions throughout the United States have begun to fall.

The Chinese emissions story is more complicated. The country started the cleanup race with a filthy, inefficient power system based largely on coal; with massive, highly polluting basic industries; and with manufacturing techniques that consumed far more energy to do a given task than those in the industrialized West.

About 15 years ago, China adopted energy-efficiency targets that cut the energy used per dollar of goods farther and faster than any nation ever has. China also invested heavily in wind and solar power, helping to drive the cost down drastically; in many places they have become the cheapest new sources of electricity. Thanks largely to that

push, developing and developed nations alike are turning to clean power on a scale that was hard to imagine even a decade ago.

Now, as China pushes electric vehicles to mass adoption, Western companies are straining to keep up. Shenzhen, a city of 12 million near Hong Kong, has 17,000 electric buses on the street. The entire taxi fleet will be electric by the end of the year, and its version of Uber is close behind.

Despite all this, economic growth in China has been so strong that total greenhouse pollution is still growing, and partly because of that, so are global emissions. Globally, we have simply not made enough progress to put emissions on a downward slope. Until emissions get to zero, the climate problem will keep getting worse, so we have a long way to go.

Governor Brown’s new pledge is important not just because others may follow, but because the dynamic California economy can help invent much of the necessary technology. It is true that his zero-carbon goal for the state’s economy is just an executive order and could be reversed. But in California, such newly announced goals from governors tend to be followed within a few years by legislation locking the targets into law.

China’s leaders have engaged in intensive dialogue with California on climate policy for more than a decade, and they consider the state’s role to be more important than anything happening in Washington. That is fortunate, given the reprehensible efforts of the Trump administration to take America backward on climate.

As we mentioned, it is not yet clear how a zero-carbon goal for an economy the size of California’s can be met — especially in the time set by the governor, 27 years hence. Governor Brown leaves office at the beginning of next year, so he is making promises his successors will have to keep.

What we do know is that California started setting climate goals during the administration of Arnold Schwarzenegger, a Republican governor, and it has tended to meet or exceed them years early. Goals serve to organize the bureaucracy; they point up gaps in achievement that may need to be filled with detailed policies; they send a powerful signal to inventors that useful technologies or business concepts will find a market. For example, it was a California mandate, copied by other states, that pushed electric cars into the American marketplace.

If China were to follow California’s target in setting an ambitious low-emissions policy, the challenge would be enormous. How do you eliminate emissions from huge industries like steel making or aluminum smelting, or limit oil use in a country of 1.4 billion people pining for cars?

Industrial techniques will need to be reinvented, and this work cannot drag out for decades. But that, in a sense, is the point. We are already seeing profound damages from global warming, and the situation is likely to worsen rapidly.

The crisis is urgent; the time for half measures is past. Governor Brown has shown the world what really needs to be done. We hope other politicians will find the courage to follow in his footsteps, China’s leaders above all.

PHOTO: Street vendors and customers at a market near a coal fired power plant in Huainan, Anhui province, China. (PHOTOGRAPH BY Kevin Frayer/Getty Images FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Document-Type: Op-Ed

Publication-Type: Web Blog

Subject: CLIMATE ACTION (91%); CLIMATE CHANGE (90%); EMISSIONS (90%); GLOBAL WARMING (90%); NEGATIVE ENVIRONMENTAL NEWS (90%); ELECTRIC MOBILITY (89%); ELECTRIC VEHICLE INDUSTRY (89%); ELECTRIC VEHICLES (89%); POLLUTION (89%); POLLUTION & ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS (89%); SUSTAINABLE TRANSPORTATION (89%); AIR POLLUTION (78%); DEVELOPING COUNTRIES (78%); EMERGING MARKETS (78%); ENERGY DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS (78%); ENERGY EFFICIENCY & CONSERVATION (78%); GREENHOUSE GASES (78%); EXECUTIVE ORDERS (77%); GOVERNORS (77%); LEGISLATION (72%); EDITORIALS & OPINIONS (59%); REPORTS, REVIEWS & SECTIONS (59%); Greenhouse Gas Emissions (%); Fuel Emissions (Transportation) (%); Solar Energy (%); Fuel Efficiency (%); Electric and Hybrid Vehicles (%); Global Warming (%); Law and Legislation (%); Air Pollution (%); Brown, Edmund G Jr (%); Schwarzenegger, Arnold (%); Trump, Donald J (%); California (%); China (%); San Francisco (Calif) (%); Shenzhen (China) (%)

Industry: EMISSIONS (90%); GLOBAL WARMING (90%); ELECTRIC MOBILITY (89%); ELECTRIC VEHICLE INDUSTRY (89%); ELECTRIC VEHICLES (89%); ENERGY & UTILITIES (89%); SUSTAINABLE TRANSPORTATION (89%); ALTERNATIVE & RENEWABLE ENERGY (78%); ENERGY DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS (78%); ENERGY EFFICIENCY & CONSERVATION (78%); MANUFACTURING (78%); MOTOR VEHICLES (78%); NATURAL GAS & ELECTRIC UTILITIES (78%); WIND ENERGY (78%); FOSSIL FUEL POWER PLANTS (76%); ELECTRICITY TRANSMISSION & DISTRIBUTION (73%); SOLAR ENERGY (73%)

Person: JERRY BROWN (79%); ARNOLD SCHWARZENEGGER (73%); Brown, Edmund G Jr; Schwarzenegger, Arnold; Trump, Donald J

Geographic: SAN FRANCISCO, CA, USA (93%); SHENZHEN, GUANGDONG, CHINA (73%); CALIFORNIA, USA (95%); CHINA (94%); UNITED STATES (79%)

Load-Date: September 15, 2018

End of Document